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Secret agency bared

By Mark Bedner
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WASHINGTON — A special Senate committee which recently recommended public disclosure of more information about federal intelligence agencies may have inadvertently taken its own advice.

The ad hoc Senate Committee on Secret and Confidential Documents issued a report Oct. 12 suggesting that the government begin printing the budget figures for several agencies engaged in classified activities. Release of the information would give Congress some idea of the amount spent on intelligence operations and how the money is used, the committee said.

The report listed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the National Security Agency (NSA) and the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) as examples of intelligence groups Congress should know more about.

The existence of the first three agencies has been widely known. The National Reconnaissance Office has not. It has maintained its anonymity on Capitol Hill, in the Pentagon and the CIA.

Both the authors of the committee report and the members of the committee were unaware of the security slip. Staff aides on the committee told Congressional Quarterly they were uncertain how reference to the NRO had appeared in print when, according to intelligence officials, the name of the agency itself was classified.

As one intelligence official said: "Hell, even its initials were supposed to be classified."

Also baffled were committee members. Chairman Mike Mansfield, D-Mont., reported that he'd never heard of the reconnaissance office until questioned by CQ. The same was true of committee members Mark O. Hatfield, R-Ore., Harold E. Hughes, D-Iowa, and Alan Cranston, D-Calif., who originated the request for more information on the agency.

"He says he's never heard of it," Cranston's legislative assistant, Ellen Frost, said. "But if you find out anything, give us a call."

According to sources in Congress, who asked not to be identified, the NRO spends in the neighborhood of \$1-billion a year for high-altitude reconnaissance flights. Using both satellites and planes, the agency conducts

surveillance for a number of intelligence organizations on a contract basis.

The emphasis on secrecy may explain why the agency was able to maintain its anonymity on Capitol Hill despite the fact that each year it receives an appropriation from Congress.

Under the CIA act of 1949, certain intelligence agencies are exempted from the normal budget reporting procedures to Congress required of federal departments.

Instead, the agencies are required only to report their budgets and plans to a small group of members in the House and Senate who sit on the four congressional "intelligence oversight" committees. Membership on the committees — two in the House and two in the Senate — is based on seniority in the Appropriations and Armed Services Committees.

Because of the nature of their oversight functions, the committees never publish transcripts of their activities and rarely make notes of committee hearings, which are always held in executive session.

Consequently, little information on intelligence operations moves beyond the oversight committees. Meanwhile, the members of the committees observe strict rules of secrecy toward intelligence matters, which partially explains why no one could or would confirm the existence of the National Reconnaissance Office.

The chairman of the Senate Appropriations oversight committee, John L. McClellan, D-Ark., was one who declined to discuss the secret agency. The committee's staff counsel, Guy G. McConnell, answered all questions about the office with a terse "no comment." He did disclose, however, that the CIA had notified the committee that inquiries were being made about the NRO.

Another member of one of the Senate oversight committees, Stuart Symington, D-Mo., agreed to discuss the agency, but then denied having ever heard of a National Reconnaissance Office. He also denied being surprised that an intelligence office had surfaced that no one apparently had ever heard of. "Intelligence activities are the least supervised aspect of our national security policy," he said.

Perhaps the most typical response of those questioned was the one of Rep. Lucien N. Nedzi, D-Mich., chairman of the House Armed Services Intelligence Operations Subcommittee and a member of that small congressional club privy to most intelligence information: "I've told you just about all that I can."

McConnell, Guy G.
Nedzi, Lucien

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CIA AIR FORCE
(NRO) National
Reconnaissance
Office
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